

LOST BUILDING

The Young Men's Christian Association Building (YMCA) 1600 Louisiana St.

For over 70 years the downtown YMCA building opened its doors to generations of Houstonians. Today the site at Louisiana and Pease holds the demolished remains of this once popular destination. Houston's Young Men's Christian Association has an even longer history, having been established in 1886. After occupying rented quarters for two decades, the organization erected its first building at Fannin and McKinney. This five-story structure remained the YMCA's principal home until the expansion of its programming required a larger facility. Thus, in 1941 the "Y" relocated to 1600 Louisiana, an address then on the outskirts of downtown. Prominent architect Kenneth Franzheim designed a ten-story Italian Renaissance building in the architectural style popular among YMCAs across the country. Featuring interior rock walls and painted-beam ceilings, the facility had a dormitory for 270 men, an assembly hall, nineteen classrooms, two gyms, six handball courts, an indoor pool and multiple exercise areas. Educational programming was an important component of the YMCA's mission. The South Texas College of Law, established by the "Y" in 1923, was located in the building at 1600 Louisiana until 1967 when it became a privately operated law school, a status it retains today at its location on San Jacinto Street. In 1948 the YMCA founded South Texas Junior College, which became the largest private two-year college in Texas. Like the law school, it, too, became an independent college in 1967 and relocated from 1600 Louisiana to the M & M Building at the foot of Main Street. Although branch YMCAs began to spring up all over the city, the Downtown Y remained an anchor in the lives of many—workers needing safe, inexpensive housing; downtown employees seeking a healthier lifestyle through fitness programs; young people learning good citizenship by participating in character building projects. Millions of Houstonians, undoubtedly, passed through the doors of this landmark during its seven decades of existence. In 2010, however, the doors closed when a new facility was built nearby, although it will not continue to provide affordable housing as in the past. In spite of a public outcry, the grand old building was razed and rehabbing the structure for a new use was not pursued. Today 1600 Louisiana is just a memory, but what rich memories they are for those whose lives intersected with the "Y" for decades.